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Introduction to the Special Issue ‘Enlightenment and Modernity’

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Abstract

These introductory remarks present a brief overview of the question of the Enlightenment’s relationship to modernity. It charts the emergence of a novel sense of historicity connected to eighteenth-century usage of the term ‘enlightened’ and the belated, late twentieth-century attempts to connect this usage to modernity. The three contributions to this special issue are then introduced and the commonalities and divergences between them are highlighted.

Keywords

enlightenment – modernity – modernization – Eurocentrism

Enlightenment and modernity are often conjoined.* But this alliance is less self-evident than the narrative of an emancipatory Enlightenment holds. Such a narrative – of a politically and morally progressive Enlightenment that lay at the foundation of modern democracy and science – came to dominate the field from the revival of Enlightenment studies in the era of mass politics towards the end of the nineteenth century and would continue in the classic studies of Paul Hazard, Ernst Cassirer and Peter Gay.¹ Significantly, however, Hazard and Cassirer did not use the term ‘modernity,’ while Gay would title the

* I would like to thank Ed Jonker, John Robertson, and Silvia Sebastiani for their constructive feedback on earlier versions of this paper.

1 Hunt and Jacob 2004.

third book of his two-volume study 'The Pursuit of Modernity'.² This reveals the importance of the 1950s and 1960s as a period when modernization theory, which incorporated the concept of modernity, would come to dominate the social sciences in the United States and elsewhere.³

Nonetheless, in all three of these accounts, we find the notion of the Enlightenment as a modern rupture in ways of life and, especially, in thought. This perspective grew out of debates that one can find surrounding 'enlightened,' 'enlightenment' and their various translations in the European vernaculars from the late seventeenth century onwards concerning what it means to live in an age of enlightenment. For example, Abbé Raynal and his co-authors' opposition to slavery depends on the self-reflexivity of living in a new era that has banished obscurantism to embrace the morally progressive: 'We will not degrade ourselves here to the point of adding to the ignominious list of those writers who use their talents to justify politically that which morality condemns. *In a century when so many errors have been courageously unmasked, it would be shameful to conceal important truths from humanity.*'⁴ This consciousness of the dawning of a new era would only later be labelled modernity and the result of an 'Enlightenment project.'⁵ But that there was a consciousness of the dawning of a new era is indisputable, perhaps best captured in the philosophy of history presented in Jean Le Rond d'Alembert's 'Preliminary Discourse' to the *Encyclopédie*. He writes, 'When we consider the progress of the mind since that memorable epoch [the renaissance of letters], we find that this progress was made in the sequence it should naturally have followed. It was begun with erudition, continued with belles-lettres, and completed with philosophy.'⁶ That d'Alembert had scientific achievements in mind is demonstrated by his article 'Modern,' where he states that modern astronomy began with Copernicus and modern physics with Descartes and Newton.⁷

The Enlightenment and modernity, as concepts and programs of research, followed similar trajectories in the post-World War II period. Despite the misgivings of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, there was a marked confidence with which the Enlightenment and modernity were put forward in the 1950s and 1960s as the way to ensure material progress and democratic government

2 Hazard 1934; Cassirer 1951; Gay 1966 & 1969; on the use of 'modern times' and 'modernity,' see Hunt 2014.

3 Gilman 2003; Koselleck 1985, chap. 1.

4 Raynal 1770, 4:167, emphasis added, my translation; on the emergence of this new way of historical thinking of the Enlightenment as an event, see Brewer 2008, chap. 2.

5 Schmidt 2000.

6 d'Alembert 1995, 60.

7 d'Alembert 1765.

in the 'benighted' areas of the non-Western world.⁸ But the Enlightenment and modernity entered a period of crisis particularly from the 1970s onwards, as criticism from within and without the Western academy demonstrated the Eurocentrism, paternalism and even racism inherent in these concepts and movements. Rather than advancing a humane program of inalienable rights, scientific rationality and democracy, postmodernists unveiled the emergence of sinister control mechanisms in modern institutions such as schools, prisons and the military. Beyond the moral indictment of Enlightenment and modernity, it became clear that the teleology imbedded in both concepts had a way of obscuring rather than illuminating the pre-modern European past and the histories of non-European peoples. In Dipesh Chakrabarty's memorable formulation: "There is a peculiar way in which all these other histories [of non-European countries] tend to become variations on a master narrative that could be called "the history of Europe."⁹

Beyond Eurocentrism, the Enlightenment and modernity have also been cast as a catastrophe for women.¹⁰ Whether women were fully subsumed under the Enlightenment category of 'man' is far from clear.¹¹ Given that the process of civilization was associated with feminization, the gendered dimension of modernity raises difficult and thorny questions. The Enlightenment's most prominent naturalist, Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, wrote that 'savages force their women to continually work.'¹² The condition of women across the periods of societal development was central to the conjectural histories of the Scottish Enlightenment and especially for John Millar in *The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks* (1771). Millar argued that 'the advancement of a people in manufactures and commerce has a natural tendency to remove those circumstances which prevented the free intercourse of the sexes,' and results in important changes 'particularly in relation to the women.'¹³ As Silvia Sebastiani has argued, the 'catch' of the place of women in Scottish Enlightenment histories was that 'the process of improvement in the condition of women was seen, first of all, as a function of the completion of the humanity of men. The measure of civilization foresaw a process of feminization, which could spill over into effeminacy, if certain limits were exceeded.'¹⁴ This captures well the

8 Horkheimer and Adorno 1997.

9 Chakrabarty 2000, 27.

10 For an excellent analysis of Enlightenment, modernity and the position of women, see Taylor 2012.

11 Tomasseli 1991.

12 Buffon 1749, 553.

13 Millar 2006, 98.

14 Sebastiani 2013, 134.

'limits of progress' (from Sebastiani's subtitle) of the progressivist view of history that is often, to a greater or lesser extent, concomitant with the concept of modernity and the Enlightenment narrative.

Resulting at least partially from these multicultural and feminist critiques, there followed a period of pluralization for the concepts of Enlightenment and modernity, as scholars from around the world began to understand and use these concepts in diverse ways.¹⁵ Because each term became more capacious, some began to worry that they would be emptied of all meaning. Regarding modernity, the historian of Africa Frederick Cooper stated that modernity risks having become 'a word for everything that has happened in the last five hundred years.'¹⁶ And the proliferation of Enlightenments means that there is now an Enlightenment for every season, Enlightenment being in the eye of the beholder.¹⁷

Despite the process of pluralization, extension, and critical distancing that has marked scholars' engagement with Enlightenment and, especially, modernity, there is a marked reticence to jettison the terms altogether. As Chakrabarty notes, *modernization* concerns the development of 'expanded communication, growth of states and populations, intensification of the use of land, and diffusion of new technologies' and *modernity* refers to reflection on these processes, wherever in the world they have occurred and is, as such, still a useful concept.¹⁸ When referring to eighteenth-century European history, Enlightenment, unlike modernity, has a credible claim to be an historical actors' category, as evidenced by the use of 'enlightened' and 'enlightenment' (and its various translations) by Europeans to refer to the advance of knowledge and morality through collective human effort across history.¹⁹ With few exceptions,²⁰ scholars have not seriously considered doing away with the term Enlightenment.

It thus seems clear that "Enlightenment" and "modernity" are with us to stay for some time to come.²¹ After decades of critique in which the teleological, paternalistic and Eurocentric aspects of both concepts have been thoroughly exposed and studied, it is perhaps a propitious moment to reflect anew on

15 Gaonkar 2001; Schmidt 2006; Pocock 2008; Conrad 2012.

16 Cooper 2005, 127.

17 The danger of proliferation is already to be found in the classic collections of essays Porter and Teich 1981, where Christian Wolff's philosophy is taken to be a sign of the Enlightenment's presence in Germany but a hindrance to Enlightenment in Sweden; see Grote 2014, 142.

18 Chakrabarty 2011, 668.

19 Lilti 2019, 21.

20 Clark 2000, 9.

21 Blitstein and Lemieux 2018.

how the Enlightenment and modernity, understood as concepts, movements and periods, bear on one another. The immediate origins of this special issue lie in the International Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies Conference held in Edinburgh in 2019. James Schmidt organized the roundtable 'Revisiting the "Philosophical Interpretation" of the Enlightenment,' during which John Robertson elaborated upon points with which he had concluded his recently published book, *The Enlightenment: A Very Short Introduction*.²² He argued that the Enlightenment was first a category of analysis for philosophers, and one which they were often very critical of, long before it was taken up by historians in the post-World War II era and subsequently, after 1989 especially, defended as the turn towards modernity.

In this journal's inaugural issue, the editors presented a balanced survey of the trajectory of modernity as both a construction useful for scholarship, with all of its limitations and critiques, and as a practical reality in seven themes in which modernity is 'on trial.'²³ They present a nuanced analysis of the Enlightenment, tracing the fragmentation and pluralization of the erstwhile monolithic, secularizing intellectual movement and emphasize how these debates feed discussion of the values and trends often associated with modernity, particularly regarding the place of religion in modern society. But our journal lacks a systematic analysis of modernity as the progeny of Enlightenment.²⁴ We had all too readily absorbed our fellow historians' defence of the Enlightenment as the intellectual foundation of modernity without sufficiently reflecting on the consequences this has for the way that we understand the Enlightenment as a movement and the subsequent history of thought. John Robertson graciously accepted my request to elaborate on the themes he presented in Edinburgh in a special issue on the Enlightenment and modernity. We are grateful that Antoine Lilti and Margaret Jacob, distinguished scholars of the Enlightenment, also agreed to contribute. As editor, I asked them to take any approach they wished on this admittedly very broad theme and the result is three stimulating articles that, in their convergences and disagreements, are all thought-provoking.

Robertson sets out to discover how it came to be that, at least since the 1980s, the defence of the Enlightenment as modernity's intellectual foundation has mainly been the preserve of historians rather than that of philosophers,

22 Robertson 2015.

23 Eijnatten, Jonker, Ruberg, and Segal 2013.

24 Though, see the special collection on the global counter-Enlightenment in this journal, which contains some reflections on the place of the counter-Enlightenment in modernity; especially Lok and Eijnatten 2019.

even though Enlightenment has been a category of philosophical analysis long before it was taken up by historians. Historical engagement with the Enlightenment picked up speed following Franco Venturi's seminal work, *Utopia and Reform in the Enlightenment*, and the contributions of an influential group of intellectual historians, which included John Pocock and Nicholas Phillipson, working on the Scottish Enlightenment between the early 1960s and late 1980s. For these historians, 'modern' was largely a descriptive rather than an evaluative term and modernity barely figured as a concept in their analyses. In Robertson's account, it is the onslaught of postmodernism that marks a turning point, spurring historians on to defend the Enlightenment as the turn towards a modernity that is still incomplete but worth a continuing and sustained defence. He convincingly shows that although Michel Foucault is commonly associated with postmodernism and, concomitantly, a frontal attack on the Enlightenment, it was in fact Richard Rorty and Alisdair MacIntyre's indictment of Enlightenment and modernity that most directly provoked historians' ire. Jürgen Habermas's defence of modernity combined with the resurgence of Islamic and Christian fundamentalism in the twenty-first century gave impetus to prominent historians of Enlightenment to double down on the vindication of Enlightenment's modern credentials. Robertson concludes by remarking that historians should not fear that recognition of the alterity of Enlightenment thinkers' debates and concerns as compared to our own will detract from the relevance of such scholarship to modernity, as it is precisely this alterity that may be the most salutary element of future academic work on the subject. And he reiterates the point that historians would benefit from a more sustained engagement with philosophers' reflections on Enlightenment and modernity.

To a greater degree than Robertson, Antoine Lilti takes modernity to be a practical – albeit multilayered, multidimensional and contested – historical reality. And he sees the Enlightenment not as the programme of modernity but instead as an intellectual movement that made a double move. First, Enlightenment holds out the promise that each individual has the capacity to use her or his own reason and that, through increased knowledge, individual persons or a people can become emancipated from oppressive traditions and superstition. Second, Enlightenment is a self-reflexive move which enables critical appraisal of the political and socio-cultural transformations associated with modernity, such as the growth of globalized commerce, the rise of an autonomous public sphere, or the waning of traditional hierarchies. Using the example of the philosophes' reflections on enlightening the public, he shows the intertwining of social changes that we can legitimately associate with modernity – increases in urbanization, literacy rates and the production of

print media – and the philosophes' acute awareness of the fraught nature of these developments. Every individual should have the right to decide for her or himself what is reasonable given the current state of knowledge, but how can we ensure that correct knowledge will win the day? He suggests that it is precisely this inherent and thus unavoidable tension in the thought of such major thinkers as Voltaire, Condorcet and Kant that makes it worthwhile to continue to study Enlightenment texts. Rather than trying to find in Enlightenment a set of ethical or epistemological principles to which we should all adhere – beyond, that is, a commitment to the autonomous use of reason in search of human betterment – our engagement with Enlightenment thinkers can be most productive when we are attuned to the interplay of socio-cultural changes that they lived through and their reflections on the contradictions wrought by those changes.

In a more polemical piece, Margaret Jacob presents a trenchant case for seeing the Enlightenment and modernity as our contemporary condition and as our greatest hope for navigating the treacherous waters we now find ourselves in, whether political (rising authoritarianism) or environmental (Covid-19 and climate change). Her article confirms Robertson's contention that post-modernism was instrumental in entrenching the historians' Enlightenment as the fundamental bulwark of modernity. Jacob takes modernity to be the historically grounded belief in political and scientific progress – the uneven yet persistent rise of representative governmental institutions and the mathematization of the sciences that allowed for ever more accurate predictions and explanations of natural phenomena. Between roughly 1500 and 1800, the European discoveries of New World peoples and the revolution in the understanding of matter and motion stretched the theories embedded in the classical and Christian traditions to a breaking point that came to a head in the early Enlightenment, exemplified by the anonymously authored radical tract *Theophrastus redivivus* of the 1650s. Jacob connects the rapid pace of scientific and technological advancement of the early modern period, particularly in the Anglo-Dutch world, to novel liberal political and economic ideas and institutions. She shows that the Enlightenment and the First Industrial Revolution, long separated in the historiography, must now be brought together because it is clear that the applied mechanics of the industrial innovators grew out of an enlightened scientific education, particularly in Great Britain. Jacob is certainly aware that the Enlightenment and modernity have not meant a sanguine story of steady moral and material progress since the seventeenth century. But she argues that the global challenge that Covid-19 presents to us, as we look to modern science and technology for accurate knowledge of the

virus and a vaccine, demonstrates that we ignore the modernity wrought by Enlightenment at our own peril.

It is striking though perhaps not completely surprising that the theme of amelioration of the human condition emerges as a common thread linking these authors' otherwise divergent accounts of Enlightenment and modernity. Dan Edelstein has demonstrated that the Enlightenment can perhaps best be understood as a narrative of the progress of society that emerged out of the well-known quarrel of the ancients and the moderns.²⁵ But Edelstein's concluding remarks point to one of the most fundamental disagreements between the three authors: 'I wish to question what we gain by defining the Enlightenment in terms of modernity. Yes, some of the values defended by the philosophes, their patrons, and their readers are values that we still hold dear today. But their modernity was very different from ours.'²⁶ The implication of reading Robertson's account is that we do not gain a deeper understanding of Enlightenment by bringing in modernity, but instead we see more clearly the political stakes of late twentieth and early twenty-first-century historiography. While Lilti and Jacob are certainly attuned to the pitfalls of defining the Enlightenment through the prism of modernity, they accept, more readily than Robertson and Edelstein, modernity as a deeper transformation in the socio-cultural fabric of western European societies that intensified in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Perhaps one of the most significant gains of the scholarship that resulted from the pluralization of the Enlightenment is that we cannot ignore the social conditions and cultural practices in which Enlightenment ideas were enmeshed. The differences between these articles demonstrate the fruitfulness of dialogues between intellectual, social, and cultural histories of Enlightenment and the productive tensions these bring to the fore.

However, after reading these articles, it also becomes apparent that the terms of the debate on Enlightenment and modernity must be clearly laid out for an effective discussion to be possible. Modernity is variously defined as the progressive elements we have inherited from the Enlightenment or as the oppressive tendencies one can easily find issuing from the same intellectual movement. We disagree on what we have inherited, and who has inherited it. But if we are clear on these elements, for example by defining modernity as reflection on processes of state formation, population growth, urbanization, and increasing literacy and access to news media, then constructive debate becomes more likely. We must be aware of the many pitfalls in usage of the

²⁵ Edelstein 2010.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 118.

category of ‘modernity,’ particularly the teleology and Eurocentrism that all too easily slip back into usage of the concept.²⁷ What these articles demonstrate is that if we are aware of these pitfalls, then pairing Enlightenment and modernity can produce a useful set of perspectives. It is the tension between reconstructing the historical context – using Enlightenment to get at what the historical actors themselves thought they were doing – and historians’ or philosophers’ analytical categories for bringing out overarching processes in which historical actors participated but could not have known, that makes the Enlightenment and modernity a fruitful nexus that I do not think has yet been exhausted.

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27 In Sjep Stuurman’s history of equality in world history, the Enlightenment plays a pivotal role, but he explicitly cautions against modernity in a longue-durée conceptual history; see Stuurman 2017, 22–26.

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